Johnny pushed open the door to his dorm room and felt it bump against something immediately followed by a slurred, female voice saying “Oh, shit!” Then laughter.

“Clear?” Johnny poked his head around the corner and asked. Liddy had been sitting on the floor, sipping Triple Sec and Gatorade from a plastic cup, when the door bumped her elbow. The sticky, florescent yellow drink had spilled all over the front of her official University of Texas T-shirt.

“Don’t you ever knock?” Liddy came to her feet, lurching against the wall. She grabbed a fistful of wet shirt and squeezed, heavy drops of booze splatting to the floor. It was impossible to tell if there was a stain on the carpet which was flat and beige with a hideously ugly pattern of swirling pastels.

“Don’t waste it, don’t waste it,” Dave said from his bed where he was relaxing with his girlfriend, Dora. He used one hand to push himself up, holding a plastic cup in the other, and half walked, half crawled to Liddy. He put his cup under her shirt to save the precious drops from hitting the floor. Liddy thought this was hysterical and gave another squeeze, the stream of booze running from her shirt into the cup sounded, and looked, like piss.

“What’s the occasion?” Johnny asked, stepping behind Liddy to get to his own bed. The room was obscenely small, barely five feet of space separating the beds, with built-in desks wrapping around the corners and claiming the fourth wall. Johnny had to step over the frame and walk on top of his bed, ducking to avoid scrapping his head on the ceiling.

“Like we need one…. ” Liddy finished wringing out her shirt and wiped the hand on her jeans. She was from India, born in New Delhi, came to America at an early age and had grown up in Ohio. She worked hard at effecting a sloppy, college student persona, but Johnny sometimes wondered what she would look like dressed up in an elegant Indian outfit, maybe doing one of those Bollywood dances, snaking her hands and rolling her big, dark eyes, a playful smile on her face. He imagined it would be stunning.

“Want one?” Dave offered, motioning towards the bottles on his desk.

“Nope. I’m in training, remember?”

“I forgot! ‘The Bluebonnet Run’! Well, shoot. One won’t kill you. There’s beer….” Dave crawled back to his bed, handing the cup to Dora. She frowned and shook her head.

“That’s disgusting,” Dora turned up her nose.

“Whaa-aat?” Liddy said, “What’s so disgusting about it?”

“It’s gross. Like drinking your bathwater.”

Dave took a sip. “Taste good to me. Look, the alcohol sterilized all her cooties.”

“I’m clean, I’m a very clean person.” Liddy said, the drunken goofiness now gone her voice.

“Hey, come on,” Dave tried to speak with a soothing voice. The next word came out as a burp and couldn’t help himself; “Whoa, Liddy, you sure taste better going down.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Liddy snapped and turned to leave, steadying herself with a hand on the wall before opening the door.

Dora continued looking at the wall while Dave made a half-assed attempt to get Liddy back, following her into the hall, trying to apologize over his own laughter. Left alone with Dora, Johnny took a step towards the Triple Sec then checked himself. *No. No more booze*. The nagging voice in the back of his mind paused before finishing the thought. *Ever.*

Ever?

Ever.

“**Have you asked** for a new roommate yet?” Sam asked, wiping his face with the hand towel he kept folded in the belt of his runner’s pack. They had just finished five miles and were walking back down the scenic trail. It was getting dark, the sun already hidden by the rolling hills of Austin.

“No, I don’t need to do that. Dave’s cool.”

“So, you’ve told him you’re an alcoholic?”

“Dude, you know what? I’m not….” Johnny stopped walking, put his hands on his hips and looked at his shoes.

“Yeah?” Sam got right up in his face, “What? You’re not what?”

“I’m only 20 years old, man.”

“I went to my first meeting when I was 18. So? What’s your point?”

“So how did you know you were an alcoholic? Couldn’t it be you were just having fun? Like everybody else?”

“Fun?”

“Come on, man, don’t start.”

“They had to pump your stomach, John. Was that fun?”

“Sam….”

“Talk to me.”

“Nevermind. Forget I said anything.”

"Come on," Sam started walking again, "Coffee. My treat."

Johnny followed a few steps behind, looking at the back of Sam's head, the peppering of light gray hairs more noticeable in the twilight. His first meeting when he was 18? What was he now? Somewhere north of 40? Johnny wondered how many times you would have to fall off the wagon to keep AA interesting for over twenty years.

Friday night in the dormitory and there was nothing to do. The students with cars had already left, some going home for the weekend, others for a night out on 6th street. Even Dave, Johnny's usual source of transportation, had left for a camping trip. He took Dora and the booze with him, including the beer from the fridge. Johnny felt a pang of resentment, after all, he had paid for some of that beer, but he pushed that thought aside and focused on the big race tomorrow.

The 5K Bluebonnet run – his excuse for not drinking these past five weeks. Five weeks! Johnny went to the full-length mirror hanging on the closet door and checked himself out. He took off his shirt and sucked in his gut. The lines of his abs were faint but recognizable under a thin layer of flab. He flexed his biceps. Not Schwarzenegger, but not bad either. His arms were hard and trim, like a runner's should be. He lifted his knees, pumping one then the other, working the thigh muscles. They were a little too thin, and his butt was a little too boney; nevertheless, Johnny felt pretty good about himself. Five sober weeks of intense conditioning, he could honestly say he was in the best shape of his life.

Much better than the morning after the hellacious drunk when he had been rushed to the hospital for fear of alcohol poisoning. They had pumped his stomach, given him some pamphlets, and sent him on his way without a lollypop. Driving back from the hospital, Dave assured him that they pumped every drunken college kid's stomach, whether they really needed to or not, because they hoped it would discourage the kids from overindulging again. "The thing is," Dave had said, looking at him with concern, "You can't let the bastards keep you down."

One of the pamphlets was for the campus AA chapter. The rest, as they say, had been one day at a time.

A loud knock jolted Johnny out of his daze. He leaned over to look through the peep hole and saw Liddy standing there, her tiny face looking cute if not a little comical through the fisheye lens. Johnny put his shirt on and opened the door.

"Hey Johnny," Liddy said, barging in like she owned the place, "I'm bored."

She flopped down on his bed and grabbed the campus newspaper from his desk. She looked at it, frowned, tossed it away. "Boring," she declared, laying back on his pillow. She hadn't done anything with her hair, and it took a while to get comfortable, pushing her head around to make a nest of the thick, frizzy black mane. Johnny recognized the way she was moving, the way her voice lilted. His heart sank.

"You've been drinking."

"I was. Alex and those guys. But then they wanted to drive out to LBJ for some reason. I think Terrance is in love with that Mary girl. She's a little fat for him, though, I think." Liddy propped herself up on her elbows, "Do you have anything? We can celebrate being the only two losers in this place with nothing to do on a Friday night."

"I don't drink anymore," Johnny said, surprising himself. That was the first time he'd said it aloud to one of his friends. It felt like he had just confided a deep personal secret with Liddy. His throat tightened while he waited for her reaction.

"Oh fuck, that stupid Bluebonnet thing." Liddy collapsed back on the pillow, "Come on, Johnny, just have a one drink with me. It won't kill you. I've heard that a little alcohol is good for athletes, thins their blood."

"No, Liddy," Johnny tried again, "Not just for the Bluebonnet run. I've joined Alcoholics Anonymous. I'm giving it up… forever" Okay, maybe the 'forever' was a little much, but having said it, Johnny wanted some kind of acknowledgement from her.

"Oh," was all she said. She swung her feet over the edge of the bed then stood up, swaying slightly as she adjusted to her sandals. She looked confused, like she wanted to be angry, but couldn't figure out why.

She opened her mouth as if to say something, then shook her head and started to leave.

"Liddy," Johnny stopped her before she opened the door. "I had to. I think I had to."

Liddy came to him, gave him a quick, powerful hug around the waist. Johnny smelled the strawberry shampoo on her hair then, underneath that, the unmistakable smell of booze on her breath. She broke the hug and left, closing the door softly behind her.

Johnny ached for her to come back. He wanted to explain himself, tell her how it was a health thing, and how much better he felt, physically, since he made the decision. He wanted to assure her that nothing would change between them, he would still hang out and party, he just wouldn't be drinking. But if she thought maybe she wanted to quit too, well, they could do it together, the ol' buddy system….

Johnny almost laughed out loud thinking about that; Johnny Rodgers: saving the world from the evils of alcohol! *Fuck you,* Johnny said to himself, *fuckyoufuckyoufuckyou….*

He grabbed his running shoes, fought with the laces until he had them loose enough to cram his feet in, then knotted them up again. He leapt from his tiny dorm room, taking great strides down the hall to the exit. He was going to run until he couldn't run anymore, then he was going to run some more. And in the morning, he was going to run that fucking race. With any luck, Johnny thought, all the running would kill him. Save life the trouble.

Sam was sitting on the patio of the campus coffee shop, hands wrapped around a steaming cup, looking at the sun setting over the hills. When he noticed Johnny climbing the

steps, Sam went to him with outstretched arms. He grabbed Johnny in a bear hug, actually kissing the side of his neck in a fit of camaraderie.

"Okay," Johnny said when the hug was over, his hand flying to the moist spot on his neck, rubbing it dry. "Sam, what's going on?"

"I owe you an apology, man. I didn't make it today."

"Yeah, what happened? I looked all over for you."

"You went? You finished?"

"Well, I crossed the finish line. I wasn't really running, but I made it. What happened?"

Sam turned away, worked his throat like he was trying to swallow a peach pit, then focused on his cup of coffee.

"I fell last night."

"What, and hurt yourself?"

Sam bobbed his head side to side, a yes and no gesture, then barked a short, ugly laugh.

"No, man, I fell off the wagon. I got stoned."

Johnny studied his sponsor's face; heavy bags under his normally intense blue eyes, dusty stubble casting a shadow on his cheeks and chin, a greasy sheen on his hair indicating he hadn't showered today. Nothing about his appearance led Johnny to believe this was a joke.

"Stoned?" Johnny asked, curious as to the choice of words.

"Oh Jesus," Sam started weeping, tears streaming down his sunken cheeks, rolling off his chin and falling to the table, some making ripples as they landed in the coffee.

Johnny leaned back and crossed his arms. He was physically exhausted from running the race and mentally slow to organize his emotions. He had been betrayed, this much was obvious, but he wasn't angry. He watched Sam wipe his face with the shoulder of his shirt, and a sense of depression seeped into Johnny's chest. It wasn't the fact that Sam got 'stoned' and missed the race, it was the thought of having an ad hoc AA meeting on the patio of this all too familiar coffee shop that turned down the corners of Johnny's mouth. Blah blah blah, all night long. Cup after cup of black coffee. He just wasn't in the mood.

Johnny rubbed his aching thighs before standing. "I'm going to get a cup," he said, giving Sam's shoulder a squeeze on his way to the counter. He passed a table where two college age girls glanced at him then leaned forward and whispered, no doubt questioning why he was with the sobbing old dude. The girls kept whispering and giggling while Johnny ordered a large coffee. When he turned around, they avoided his eyes, smirking at each other like they were sharing a secret joke.

On his way back, Johnny stopped and looked down at the two girls. He didn't recognize them, but they could easily be in one of his lecture classes. Attractive, fresh faced girls, both with auburn hair tied into sporty ponytails, wearing T-shirts and jeans. They were the prototypical University of Texas female students. They squirmed in their seats when Johnny didn't move on, still afraid to make eye contact with him.

"He's an alcoholic," Johnny told them, "just fell off the wagon."

One of the girls started to say something but Johnny cut her off.

"I'm an alcoholic too. That's why we're together."

With that, Johnny walked away, blowing steam from his cup of coffee. The girls continued whispering to each other with a renewed intensity. At least the weren't giggling anymore. That had to count for something.

Surprisingly, it didn't take all night to iron things out with Sam. He apologized for missing the run, getting a little preachy with it towards the end, making sure Johnny knew the importance AA puts on apologizing to the people whose lives you mess up with your drunken behavior. Johnny assured Sam, he wouldn't hold it against him, it was no big deal. "No big deal, huh?" Sam's eyes reclaimed some of their intensity, "I got fucked up and broke a promise to you. One day, one morning; an event we planned on…. No big thing, they'll be other Saturday mornings, right? Other Bluebonnet runs… But enough of these events go by, man, that's your life. All broken and fucked up. That's your fucking life."

Jesus, Johnny prayed, *please don't let him start crying again.*

And, as sure as God smiles on a drunk, Sam pulled himself together, finished the last of his coffee and got up to leave without shedding any more tears. Johnny stood with him, asking if he would be alright, if he wanted to talk about it, even inviting him to crash at the dorm as Dave was going to be gone all night. But Sam just gave Johnny another bear hug, thanked him, apologized again, and said he had to see some other people, try to make things right again.

Johnny was exhausted and his legs hurt, but he didn't want to go back to the dormitory, so he walked around campus in the waning light of the sunset. He felt a little unhinged as he moved through the elongated shadows cast by the university buildings but couldn't figure out why. Sam had fallen off the wagon, and though his brain told him that it was a terrible and important event, Johnny didn't feel bad about it. If anything, he felt oddly happy for Sam. At least he got to cut loose; dancing at a nostalgic honky-tonk or hanging with a burned-out ex-hippy in a rocking trailer, smoking weed and drinking wine on a Friday night in Austin, Texas…. Like living a Willie Nelson song. He couldn't hold that against poor old Sam.

Then there was the Bluebonnet run. Five weeks of intense conditioning and in less than two hours it was over. And after the race, standing around talking with some of the other

runners; it seemed like all of them had wives or girlfriends waiting at the finish line. Bright, attractive women who hugged their sweaty, stinky men as a sign of unconditional support and love.

All Johnny had waiting for him was a bottle of Gatorade and sore feet.

Then he thought about Liddy; how she clung to his arm or sometimes held his hand when they walked together. How she laughed at his jokes and called him ‘my blue-eyed boy’. She even kissed him once, a sloppy thing brought about by an impromptu game of ‘spin the empty bottle’. Of course, they were the only two people in the room, and they were both good and drunk at the time. They acted like it was a joke, Liddy giggling into her hands while he opened another bottle so they could drink it all and do it again. They never made it through the second bottle.

He had been playing with the idea that they might be falling in love but judging from the way she fled when he told her he’d joined Alcoholics Anonymous, he knew it wouldn’t happen now. Not unless she decided to stop drinking too.

Johnny found himself on the southeast side of the campus, on the road leading to a strip mall that housed an infamous liquor store owned and operated by a Chinese lady who never asked for ID. Johnny walked a little faster, knowing that she closed her shop at 10:00.

When Johnny got back to the dorms, he was surprised to find Liddy sitting in the hall, leaning against his door with her head resting on her knees. She smiled when she saw him shuffling down the hall, moving slowly on feet that had all they could stand for one day.

“Hey Johnny,” she said, rising to greet him, “what’s wrong?”

“My feet are killing me,” he replied, self-consciously moving the tell-tale brown paper bag from under his arm.

“Yeah? What’s in the bag? Medicine?”

Johnny handed her the bottle while he unlocked the door. She pulled enough of it from the bag to read the label, nodded, and put it back. “Nice,” she said.

They entered the room, and Johnny fell face first on his bed, letting out a powerful groan.

“So,” Liddy sat next to him, pushing his hips over with her butt, “did you win?”

“No,” Johnny answered and rolled over on his back. A look passed between them. Johnny noticed for the first time how sharp and bright Liddy’s eyes were when she was sober; jet black with just a shading of warm, chestnut brown around the edges. He lost himself momentarily, staring at her like he’d been spellbound. She put a hand on his chest and pressed him into the mattress.

“Lay down. Let me help you with your shoes,” she said, twisting to reach his feet.

“You’d better not,” Johnny sat up and she pushed him down again. “I’m serious. Those sneakers have got to be something funky.”

“Oh, shut up,” Liddy laughed, untying his shoes and pulling them off by the heel. Then she put her fingers under the elastic of his sweat socks and rolled them off as well. “My God,” she said, “did you know you have blisters?”

“Yeah, I figured.” Johnny sat up. “Listen, don’t do that. Its gross.”

“Sit back down,” Liddy gave him another shove then went into the bathroom. Johnny heard water running and she came out with a drenched bath towel. She wrung the towel over his feet then wrapped the warm, wet cloth around them, gently massaging with her dainty hands.

“Hey now,” Johnny laughed, “Does this mean I have to marry you?”

Liddy didn’t laugh; she just smiled as she rubbed his feet. She looked a little sad and Johnny didn’t know what else to say, so he rests his head on the pillow. He felt incredibly tired, the numbness in his legs spreading throughout his body. He closed his eyes and saw the bluebonnets from the morning run, millions of them blanketing the hills, moving in the wind like ocean waves as he jogged by.

When he woke up, Liddy was lying in bed next to him, snuggling under his arm. She was completely clothed, but she must have taken off his shirt and jeans because he was in his underwear. He moved away quickly, sitting up and wrapping the sheet around his waist.

Liddy rolled over and opened her eyes. She smiled when she saw him there.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning.”

“Sleep well?”

“Never better.”

Liddy grabbed the sheet and tried to pull it away, laughing. Johnny held on for dear life. “What are you hiding under there?” she demanded, pulling herself closer to him.

They tussled on the bed, playfully fighting for control of the sheet. Eventually Johnny won, wrapping himself in an enormous diaper. Liddy conceded, resting her head against his bare chest, her hair covering his stomach.

“They had a saying in the temple where I grew up,” Liddy said when they stopped laughing, “A Hindu prayer. It started with a beautiful line; *Lead me from the unreal*.”

Johnny used his hand to move hair away from her face so he could see her eyes.

“I liked that,” she continued, talking low now, almost whispering. “It was simple. And I always remembered it every time I got drunk. *Lead me from the unreal to the real….* It’s a great prayer for alcoholics; all you must do is switch those two words; real and unreal.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“You bought a bottle last night,” she said, hugging him tight.

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t drink it.”

Liddy tilted her head and Johnny kissed her. It was a gentle kiss, soft and tender, and when they broke apart Johnny saw Liddy’s eyes were wet with tears. He wrapped her in his arms, pulling their bodies together, and they sunk into the mattress, laying face to face.

“Is this the real?” she asked, her body trembling slightly.

Johnny held her close, and his eyes fell on the liquor bottle sitting on his desk, still in a brown paper bag. *Real or unreal*. Real was having his stomach pumped for alcohol poisoning. Real was Sam breaking down in the coffee shop. Real was standing across the counter from the smiling Chinese lady, pointing at a bottle while reaching for his wallet. Real was being this close to throwing it all away because he was depressed and lonesome.

Unreal was Liddy waiting by his door when he came back. Unreal was her taking off his shoes and rubbing his tired feet. Unreal was waking up next to her, playing together on the narrow bed, laughing, acting like lovers before they had even kissed.

Unreal was the unopened bottle of booze sitting on his desk.

It’s a great prayer for alcoholics; all you must do is switch those two words….

“Yeah,” Johnny answered her, “it’s real.”